

A Sense of Time and Place: The Historian's Approach to the Urban Past

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A SENSE OF TIME AND PLACE:
THE HISTORIAN'S APPROACH TO THE URBAN PAST

The purpose of this discussion is to examine the contributions that various disciplines have made and are making to the study of the urban past in terms of subject matter, conceptualization, and methodology. It is my task to outline the role of the historian (narrowly defined) in this venture. The question which immediately arises is: as the historian does not have exclusive jurisdiction over the study of the urban past, either as subject matter or as a dimension of urban studies, what does he have to contribute beyond a rather amateurish approach to the increasingly technical methodology employed today? In general, I think the contribution might be described as a special sense of time and place. In the context of other approaches, it falls somewhere between that of the social scientist interested in discovering general patterns and that of the local historian concerned only with the unique and particular. This rather nebulous middle ground perhaps is best defined by describing what historians think they are doing and by a selective look at what they have done.

The study of urban history in Canada and in Britain is still in its infancy, but interest in the field has grown rapidly in recent years. Also growing is the use of American concepts, for the study of urban history is most highly developed in the United States, although it should be noted that the most significant approach to Canadian urban history - the metropolitan thesis - is essentially homegrown.

Canadian historians of past decades could hardly be accused of having overemphasized the place of the city in Canadian history. Their neglect may be attributed to a general view that cities have not been a significant feature of Canadian development on the assumption that cities were relatively small and their populations constituted only a tiny proportion of the total Canadian population prior to the twentieth century. But then how does one account for the slow growth of interest in the field in Britain, one of the most highly urbanized countries in the world by the late nineteenth century? It may have something to do with the fundamental question about what is the legitimate unit of

historical inquiry. The positivist tradition - a denial of the possibility of studying anything but individuals, their actions, and relations - has been strong in Britain and Canada, theoretically undercutting the possibility of studying a social whole or collective such as a city. On the other hand, American historians were influenced by the great Chicago school of sociologists of the 1920's and seem to have been less suspicious of the social scientists' attempts to comprehend the human and physical scale of the city by the process of abstraction.

There are numerous indications of the increasing interest in urban history, including the newsletters in Britain, United States and Canada, and recent conferences in all three countries dealing with the urban past. But despite the recent activity, commentators still decry the absence of a generally accepted conceptual framework, although proposals in this direction have been put forward by a number of scholars. Still, "the apparent chaotic state of urban history is hardly surprising when one considers the complexity of the subject matter. I think we might well stop decrying the fact that so many different approaches are being used and regard this as a positive sign, for urban history has become one of the most exciting branches of the historical discipline with its practitioners in the vanguard of rethinking the nature of history as a field of study."

In the field of Canadian 'urban' history, especially, two broad approaches can be discerned and occasionally an historian's work will fall into both. "The first consists of those studies which deal with historical processes or events in an urban setting - anything that has happened in cities - without too much worry for what is "urban" in the subject. The second category includes work in which the author has concerned himself with what is generically urban in his subject. The city is usually considered as a special kind of environment with unique patterns of social organization." The bulk of what is generally considered to be urban history in Canada, or elsewhere, fits into the first category, made up primarily of urban biographies and theme studies. In a sense it deals with the neglected events which happened to take place in cities, though the urban biography sometimes has qualities which are missing in supposedly more sophisticated approaches to urban

history. In the second category - the city as a special kind of environment - two elements assume considerable significance: the metropolitan concept and the city-building process, both influenced by the ecological sociologists but without their deterministic inclinations.

It would not require much imagination to conclude a discussion about the nature and state of urban history - and of Canadian urban history in particular - on a negative note. I could criticize the lack of a conceptual framework or of comparative work. I could list the topics which have been ignored and the cities for which biographies have not been written, and so on. And yet, the growing activity in the field, the increased sophistication of methodology and the genuine interest in interdisciplinary communication should lead to optimism about the place of the historical dimension in urban studies and of the historian's role in studying the urban past.

I realize that any attempt to generalize about the direction in a field as diverse as urban history probably only amounts to a statement of one's personal approach and interests. My reading in the field leads me to conclude, however, that in addition to theme studies and general analyses of the process of urbanization, the approach which offers the greatest scope to the urban historian in the study of the individual community. This involves seeing a community as a whole and relating the parts to the larger context on the assumption that a community's life has meaning not discernible by a study of fragmentary portions only. This also involves combining local and universal interests. With his feet in two camps - history and urban studies - the urban historian is grounded in local history, seeing a community in its particularity and uniqueness and at the same time aware of the general and comparative aspects of his subject matter. And finally, this involves an appreciation of the way in which human factors of personality and decision-making combine with large-scale, faceless social forces in the development of a community.

Gilbert Stelter

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